DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 721 CS 204 391

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TITLE Alexander Pope and the Comma Splice, or, Contradictions and Problems in College Composition--An Administrator's View.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Responsibility; *College Curriculum; *College Teachers; *Composition (Literary); *English Departments; English Education; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Research Opportunities

ABSTRACT

The training of doctoral candidates in English often does not match the kind of teaching they must do upon taking their first jobs: namely, training is in literature, while most jobs are available in composition. Even when acceptable composition teachers are found, keeping them in the face of budgetary restraints and declining enrollments is difficult. Furthermore, the pressure to publish or perish presents problems, especially in regard to research, for these teachers are not likely to have the tools or the background to formulate and carry out research projects in composition when their training is in literature. The administrator's task is to ensure adequate time for teaching (including small classes, time for grading, and time for special assistance to students) as well as to help reeducate both composition teachers to be able to carry out research and departmental faculty, who neither respect nor support composition research and teaching. As the administrator is successful, staff morale is likely to rise. As composition teachers develop a sense of pride, specialty courses may be developed so that the teaching of composition beyond freshman courses becomes part of the curriculum at all levels and in all departments. (TJ)

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Alexander Pope and the Comma Splice, or, Contradictions and Problems in College Composition--An Administrator's View

Robert R. Bataille

I almost entitled this talk, thinking of Lord Byron's difficulties with the critics, "composition teachers and literary reviewers," the latter phrase referring to those who may very well stand in judgment upon the efforts of composition teachers, at least in large schools like the ones many of us received our higher degrees from. One of the contradictions I wish to touch upon, then, is the rather widespread one that exists between the training most Ph.D. or even M.A. candidates still receive in American universities and the kind of teaching they must do upon taking their first jobs. You will have guessed that I speak of the training in literature followed by a career in composition. There is more than one dimension to this problem, and I shall begin with the first one from an administrator's view, which is the problem of distinguishing the genuine composition person from the "closet" literature person who is nevertheless trying to pass himself or herself off as a composition teacher. The strategies are rather familiar to most of us who have had to wade through hundreds of applications. First, there is the mention in the first paragraph of the applicant's letter of the candidate's desire to teach freshman English exclusively--or if not freshman English, the intermediate composition, or if not that, then technical writing. Literature is mentioned only in passing as perhaps one's third or fourth choice, welcome but reluctantly admitted to, only because the dissertation is likely to be on a literary subject.

Which fact of course returns us to the original problem: not enough graduate students are given adequate training in graduate studies so that

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they can become dedicated composition teachers upon obtaining a job. As things now stand, they are not, many of them, even credible candidates. Which brings me to a second strategy: the candidate's detailing his or her composition experience, which more often than not turns out to have been teaching experience in what are called freshman composition programs but which are really programs in the introduction to literature.

The administrator's problem, then, is to sift out those many pseudo-composition candidates so that the genuine thing can be illuminated. To suggest how, in specifics, this administrative problem is solved is thus to suggest at the same time a solution to the problem of the untrained candidate and to the inflexible graduate program which produced her or him. What follows, then, is a recipe entitled "how to train a credible composition teacher." I can begin by stating that in general one should urge some training in education psychology--Piaget, for example, seems a staple of those few Ph.D. candidates who have been able to map out a future research area as well as forging their own Ph.D. concentration. Some knowledge of statistics, especially since so many research projects are likely to involve large numbers and quantitative data. Some work in applied linguistics, as of course this field, whether one thinks of scholars Young, Becker, and Pike or of problems like dialect interference, is requisite for any composition specialist today. Much of this may seem obvious and even trite to those of you already deeply involved in composition but it is doubtful that as much can be said for the majority of your literary-trained brethern.

Our composition trainee, moving a bit closer to traditional English studies, must also be exposed to rhetoric in a broad fashion, particularly the works of Winterowd, Hairston, Corbett, and others who have used it in developing new thrusts or syntheses in composition. But the practical

side needs development, too, and in place of the traditional introductions to literature courses that often pass as substitutes for FE and are hence the bulk of what most graduate students teach need to be genuine composition courses where writing, not literary criticism, is in the foreground. And more: such training should also include an exposure, either as an assistant to a regular staff member or as an instructor, to those other fast-growing composition areas business communications and professional or technical writing. If enough linguistics has been taken, the senior graduate instructor might even be profitably given a chance to teach a course like technical writing for foreign students.

But what happens after a credible candidate is recruited? How does one keep him or her in the face of ever-ascending budgetary restraints, a declining enrollment, and increasing pressure to publish or perish. This last problem is perhaps the most crucial one. It is fair to say that under normal teaching loads a composition instructor will not have as much free time as his literature counterpart to pursue his or her own research. Trained in Pope but teaching composition, such a faculty member faces a contradiction that requires him or her to develop--and develop quickly--a series of research projects that can eventuate in publication in order to appease the tenure gods.

Because our profession believes that teaching and research should reinforce each other, the new composition teacher might logically persuade himself or herself to map out a research project in composition. But having studied Pope, he or she will possess neither the background nor the tools to formulate and carry one such a project. The administrator's problem then, is one of helping the teacher to a re-education and

then to a formulation of fruitful research undertakings. In so doing he must re-educate segments of his own departmental faculty who may be unwilling to respect or to support such work (how many departmental review procedures are spelled out with a literary bias built into the research expectation and hence make the review committee's job difficult when composition faculty members are reviewed?) and then carry the fight to the "reviewers," the faculty-at-large who may be sitting on college tenure and promotion committees and who may be hostile or indifferent to research in composition areas.

This last problem, the problem of getting one's colleagues to respect and reward research and service activities in composition, is crucial for the department administrator who wishes to build the department's composition programs, for this can only be done, as it is with other fields, by attracting and then keeping a dedicated composition staff. Being able to do this, in part, means fueling research projects not only in freshman composition, but also in technical writing, business writing, intermediate composition, EFL writing programs; and in whatever additional composition areas are taught at the institution. Further, it means seeing the possibilities in cross-fertilization that can take place by juxtaposing people working in their varied but related areas. Ultimately what needs to be challenged is the hiring of weakly qualified people of whatever training at low rank and salary to teach composition courses. Such practice can only continue to convey the message that composition research and teaching is relatively unimportant.

My own experience bears this out. Our departmental research committee last fall rated at the bottom of their list a proposal to study the teaching of composition in Iowa's community colleges on the grounds that it

was only an administrative chore. Message: composition just is not taken with the same degree of seriousness as the other branches of our discipline.

I said a minute ago that when time for research is considered the literature person has more available than does his or her composition counterpart. One of the reasons for this is that, as we all know, composition courses take more of one's time than do literature courses, especially if these composition courses are taught professionally (i.e., with plenty of writing and pre-writing, plenty of conferences, plenty of creative class exercises). It is imperative, then, that the departmental administration fight to lower the size of composition classes or, if by good fortune, the sizes are already low, to fight to keep them there. If the face of cost-conscious deans such struggle is not easy. To be able to claim that the instructors of such classes are engaged in research related to these classes will help the administrators keep enrollments down. Another strategy is to insist that the time needed to prepare such courses, especially to grade the work, is considerably more than that required for a literature course. Finally, the reminder that today's writing students need and demand a great deal of special attention is one that administrators can at least be certain deans are fully aware of. The department administration should be aware of the statistics on composition class enrollments at comparable institutions and must use these as ammunition when necessary. What seem to be fair loads are of course debatable, but I believe no advanced composition class should have more than twenty students in it and fifteen is a reasonable goal to aim at, although for many of us it may seem initially unrealistic. Freshman courses are in fact averaging about twenty-five students, according to

a recent study[1] but probably should be in the low twenties (20-22).

Naturally most of the remedies to the specific problems heretofore discussed are bound to increase the morale and hence the creativity and efficiency of one's staff. If a certain pride can be developed certain projects can be expected, particularly if one's department is large enough in composition offerings and staff talents to provide the kind of cross-fertilization so often seen in the cooperation between teacher-scholars in literature. Several examples will illustrate. Technical writing for foreign students is a popular and growing course at Iowa State, and it is a course where two special talents are needed: technical writing expertise and applied linguistics. Having last year lost two of our teachers in this course, we advertised for this combination of specialties but found no really suitable candidates. Yet realizing the importance of such a course, a linguist and a technical writing teacher got together and decided to attempt team-teaching the course. Each would of course teach the other what he or she knew, with the hoped-for result that the department would gain two new teachers of technical writing for foreign students.

Other creative experiments have been spawned as well. A course in free-lance writing for magazines was offered by the department for the first time in 1976-77. Team-taught by writing teachers who have themselves published in commercial magazines, the course proved extremely successful and will be given again this year. Also to be given this year is a course in proposal and resume writing; it has already been enthusiastically endorsed by a number of people outside the department, including the vice-president for research. I mention these two courses only to exemplify what I meant by cross-fertilization. Because the

writing staff now feels it is beginning to be recognized and as a result has a higher morale than ever before, it is enthusiastically attempting to meet both old and new needs with imaginative efforts that influence each other. It almost seems that if a critical mass of staff, courses, and needs can be achieved, then a complete composition program combining research, service, and teaching may be created even in departments where the Ph.D. is not given.

When this occurs or begins to occur, two more problems may face the administrator. First, if the composition program is healthy and dynamic, the administrator might very well wish to see reinforced in other classrooms what was accomplished in the composition class. I am speaking of all-too-familiar problem of trying to get our colleagues in other disciplines to require writing from their students, students once ours who need to realize that writing can and should be undertaken in situations other than just writing class. What must be done is an involvement of other teachers from other disciplines in the teaching of writing. This may be done, first, by reminding them that writing is not just a means of communication but also a way of knowing a subject and then by having the English department sponsor workshops where teachers from various disciplines can get together to discuss just what constitutes good writing. Such a program has already been successfully established in Iowa at Grinnell College and is being tried elsewhere. Whether this identical program could or should be duplicated elsewhere is not the question; rather, its success shows that some variation of the Grinnell experience could be successful at different kinds of institutions provided that the instrumentation were flexible enough.

Then there are the problems, even with successful writing programs, of the "backslider." The term backslider describes the person who, although perhaps quite successful as a composition teacher, was originally trained as a literature specialist and who has taken up composition primarily to survive. The backslider now wishes to return to literature and in so doing looks less and less fondly upon composition assignments.[2] He or she frequently tries an oblique withdrawal by pleading a need for variety, a disenchantment with the writing course policies, and similar strategies. My feeling is that such behavior will continue to occur as long as the teacher-scholar of composition does not receive the rewards that his or her literary peer does and as long as teaching composition is made to seem a chore, a druggery, an assignment that no one else wants or gets. Perhaps no complete solution to the backslider problem can be effected until some changes take place in graduate school training and outlook. However, if everyone were teaching at least some composition, the problem might be lessened. The fact that at Iowa State even full professors teach freshmen English helps us enormously: freshman English in fact becomes our uniting force, our one shared experience.

This brings me back to where I began by talking about graduate education in English. We all recognize, I think, that the cycle of graduate education in English works this way: graduate professors teach literature courses, preferably only at the graduate level, and in order to keep doing this they naturally try to attract as many graduate students as possible who then, instead of taking courses centered on the realities of what they will be actually teaching when they graduate, take literature courses almost exclusively. When these students go into the shrinking job market and are lucky enough to find jobs, the attitudes of the professors who

taught them are carried along and hence the cycle renews itself.

But it is doubtful that the cycle can continue much longer except in the most prestigious graduate schools. An incident reported by Professor Neal Woodruff in a recent article for the ADE Bulletin will illustrate. Professor Woodruff, attending the Conference on Alternative Careers for Doctoral Degree Recipients in the Humanities, among others, heard supervisors in government at all levels claim that traditional Ph.D. graduates did not work well in government. One panelist asserted that graduate programs did not prepare people to function in the real world, only to administer further graduate programs.[3] The irony, however, as I hope I have shown, is that, when it comes to the Ph.D. in English, these graduates are not even competent for that! We are not even producing people aware of the realities of academic life in most English departments.

Sometime soon then the spectacle of Alexander Pope meeting the comma splice must end. For one thing, there are hardly any jobs for people who can teach only narrow literary specialities--that should by now be clear to all. For another, the jobs that are available, at least in departments I am familiar with, do most certainly require from the candidate a commitment to composition. Slowly, then, as literature courses draw fewer and fewer graduate students and as market pressures increase so that graduate departments are forced, in order to survive, to offer more in such areas as composition, rhetoric, and applied linguistics--slowly but certainly the old cycle will be broken. And who knows but that sometime in the not-too-distant future more department administrators will receive the same reply I received this year from one of my writing teachers

whom I thought I was doing a favor by assigning a literature course--his indignant reply: "I don't want that literature course--I'm a teacher of writing."

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March, 1978